



TO: Liam Skinner, Interim Superintendent
FROM: Robin Desmond, Chief Academic Officer *R. Desmond*
DATE: August 7, 2023
RE: *Lowell High School Graduation Policy Change Request*

Attached please find a request from Lauren Champion, Director of the Student Resource Center, seeking the approval of the Lowell School Committee to make a change to the Lowell High School graduation policy. Early spring, Lowell High Head of School, Mike Fiato, Ms. Champion and other LHS staff reviewed the current local policy, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's graduation requirements and student data to determine how to best meet the needs of students. The current local policy requires students to pass 20 credits in their fourth year of high school in order to earn a diploma with a potential for case-by-case waivers submitted to the Head of School. The attached request proposes to strike both the four-year and 20-credit requirements from the Lowell High School graduation policy due to the added barrier it creates for students at-risk of dropping out. These two requirements are not mandated by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, rather these are local policies.

MEMORANDUM

To: Robin Desmond, Chief Academic Officer
From: Lauren Campion, Director of Student Resource Center
Date: May 12, 2023
Subject: Lowell High School Graduation Policy Update

I am writing to propose a policy change regarding the graduation requirements for Lowell High School. Current policy requires students to pass 20 credits in their fourth year of high school in order to earn a diploma with a potential for case-by-case waivers submitted to the Head of School. I propose Lowell High School update their graduation policy to strike both the four-year and 20-credit requirements due to the added barrier it creates for students at-risk of dropping out.

Specific changes to the Lowell High School Policy (LHS Handbook) for 2023-2024 are below.

Page 4: To obtain a diploma of graduation from Lowell High School, each student in the class of 2024, and 2025 must satisfy the following minimum requirements:

- ~~At least four (4) years' attendance at the high school level.~~
- Fulfill the standard requirement of earning at least 90 credits, ~~of which at least 20 credits must be earned in the senior year.~~
- Pass the MCAS exams in ELA, Mathematics, and Science or meet Competency Determination.

Page 5: To obtain a diploma of graduation from Lowell High School, each student in the class of 2026 and beyond must satisfy the following requirements:

- ~~At least four (4) years' attendance at the high school level.~~
- Fulfill the standard requirement of earning at least 90 credits, ~~of which at least 20 credits must be earned in the senior year.~~
- Pass the MCAS exams in ELA, Mathematics, and Science or meet Competency Determination.

Page 16: (applicable text)

- ~~Must have at least four (4) years attendance (eight complete semesters) at the high school level.*~~
- Must fulfill the standard requirement of ninety (90) credits ~~of which at least twenty (20) credits must be earned in the senior year~~

Students are currently allowed to appeal for a waiver of the four-year, twenty-credit requirement, but “must submit a letter of appeal, with the recommendation of their House Dean, to the Head of School for final approval.” The waiver process leaves room for subjectivity and limits the pool of those who may benefit from the waiver due to barriers including mental health concerns, housing instability, economic need, or family responsibilities—as these students may be less likely to advocate for themselves to receive the waiver.

This policy update should also extend to Special Education students who are not on a diploma pathway in earning a Certificate of Attainment, provided they are still extended the opportunity to return to school until they are 22 years old per state regulations.

Enclosed is a justification for these changes toward the following goals: alignment with state policy, equitable graduation pathways for non-traditional students, increase in district's overall graduation rate, reduction in the dropout rate, and prioritizing competency over seat time.

Justification for Policy Change

Alignment with State Policy: This proposal would align Lowell's local requirements with state regulations, which allows for districts to graduate students who meet local curriculum requirements and receive a competency determination through MCAS. Our proposal would align with the state policy by allowing students to demonstrate competency through a variety of means, rather than requiring them to earn a specific number of credits in a specific timeframe.

Equitable Graduation Pathways for Non-Traditional Students: By waiving the requirement of passing 20 credits in a 4th year of high school, we will create more equitable graduation pathways for non-traditional students. Many students face unique challenges that may prevent them from earning the required credits in a traditional classroom setting. By allowing these students to demonstrate competency in their chosen areas of study through alternative means, we will create more pathways to success for all students.

Increase in the District's Overall Graduation Rate: Our district's overall graduation rate will also benefit from this policy change. By eliminating the hurdle of a subjective waiver process that benefits a portion of the students facing barriers, we will decrease the number of students who drop out due to an inability to meet the 20-credit senior year requirement. This, in turn, will lead to an increase in our district's overall graduation rate.

Reduction in the Dropout Rate: This policy change will lead to a reduction in the dropout rate, which was a record-high 5.5% in 2022. By providing more opportunities for students to demonstrate competency, we will reduce the number of students who feel discouraged or overwhelmed by the traditional classroom setting. This will lead to a more engaged student body and a reduction in the number of students who drop out before earning their diploma.

Competency over seat-time: If a student has achieved the required amount of credits in each academic subject, they should earn their competency determination for a high school diploma. Prioritizing competency over seat-time is an important shift in our educational system endorsed by the state as an innovation pathway. Competency or mastery-based grading is currently in practice at the Career Academy, a DESE recognized Innovation School, and surrounding schools including Haverhill High School. A waiver of the 20-credit requirement for seniors year may open the door for further innovation through work-based learning and other real-world competencies promoted through the Portrait of a Graduate school redesign process.

In conclusion, Lowell High School should strike the requirements of passing 20 credits in a 4th year of high school in order to earn a diploma. This policy change will align with state policy, create more equitable graduation pathways for non-traditional students, increase our district's overall graduation rate, and reduce the dropout rate, and prioritize competency over seat-time.